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The Real Snag in Social
Center Extension



Courtesy of the Boston School Committee

Heat, Light and Service Welding a Neighborhood

THE REAL SNAG IN SOCIAL CENTER EXTENSION

By Clarence Arthur Perry

A tableful of school superintendents, temporarily released from listening to one another's papers, were comfortably discussing one of Rueger's dinners and also, between mouthfuls, their home city problems.

"The trouble with the uplifters," said the man from the middle west, "is that they don't realize you can't open an assembly room for an evening entertainment without its costing money. The janitor——"

"What!" interjected an Ohioan, "Won't your janitors work overtime for the love of humanity?"

"Do they in your town?" was the quick rejoinder.

"A janitor is a good deal like a light meter. Both will run after-hours but the result of the extra labor will always show up in the end," commented another.

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The man from Pennsylvania laid down his fork. "One of our prominent women recently remonstrated, 'But you don't let your fires go out every night, do you? Why should our association have to pay for heat whenever it uses the kindergarten room?'"

"Her experience evidently hadn't taught her the economy of the banked fire," remarked his neighbor.

"No, and she didn't know either that in many schools you can't turn the heat on a single room after supper without requiring the engineer to work overtime and without developing heat enough to warm many other rooms than the one to be used. After I explained to her very carefully that there wasn't a cubic foot in the whole building that could be used by outsiders at night for five minutes without involving work for someone, and that work meant expenditure of energy and energy was money and when money was spent it had to come from somewhere—then she came back with 'All right. Let the school board stand it. They are spending the people's money. That's what we give it to them for.'"

After the laughter had subsided the speaker went on. "Well, then I began to take heart. I got down the budget under which we were working and spread it out before her. 'This,' I said, 'is a list of the sums of money which the people have given the Board to spend during this year, and here are the purposes for which we may spend them. If we devote a dollar of this money to a purpose not plainly set down here we break the law. Now, if you can find a single item here which sets aside money for the expenses of meetings held by outside organizations, I'll not only publicly apologize to your association, but I'll refund to it every cent it has been charged for heat, light and janitor service during the current year.'"

"Hurrah!" shouted the Ohioan, amidst the general rattle of approval. "I fancy she and you don't speak now—as you pass by."

"No; she was one of the right sort. That little heart to heart talk will probably result in our having a dental clinic much sooner than we could otherwise have gotten one. For years I've been begging my board to give me the money for one. Since our talk this woman has persuaded her organiza-

tion to get behind my request, and now things are beginning to move."

"Do you know what they did in my town?" put in an Eastern superintendent. "The chairman of a school improvement society—he happens to be a reporter—attacked me through his paper because I wouldn't take money from my special class fund to run the dances they had started, after their own money had given out. . . ."

Thus it became clear why in so many places the school officials and voluntary organizations are not pulling together, why misunderstanding and mutual hostility are often nullifying their earnest endeavors even though both are working for the same broad end. Uncertainty as to the people's will is the difficulty. The school man is absolutely sure of his mandate to teach the three R's and perhaps the art of wielding hammer and saw, or needle and broom. The course of study sets forth his work in black type and, more unmistakably still, sums of potent money have been placed in his hands with which to put this specific program into effect.

Uncertainty
is the snag

But basketball, folk dancing, amateur theatricals, community discussions—has the conduct of such doings been laid upon his shoulders by the taxpayer with an equal definiteness and lack of uncertainty? Surely they are educational, you say. But do all of your neighbors think as you do? Well, at any rate they would be improving to humanity, you argue. Probably so, and yet—you would undoubtedly start a warm little debate even upon this point if you were to assert it before either your church deacons or your ward politicians.

It can be
removed

However, all this uncertainty can be removed by a very simple device. Ask the people as a whole to decide, by some clear expression, whether or not they will grant a definite sum of money for the carrying on of social center activities. To the submission of such a proposition school officials cannot object without reflecting upon their attitude as public servants, while the more enterprising ones will welcome it because of the enlargement of their function which may thus result. In addition, such a step automatically secures wide publicity for the idea, uncovers any secret hostility and strengthens the community's self-esteem as a self-governing body.

In securing a popular expression upon a social center project there are three definite steps.

The Three Steps:

- I. Deciding how large a social center appropriation to ask for.
- II. Getting the board of education to include this item in its tentative annual budget.
- III. Getting the item allowed by the common council, board of estimate, or whatever body is charged with the decision upon budgetary requests.

I. Determining the Amount Needed

There is a certain time every year—in the late spring in many places—when the members of the school board decide how much money they are going to want for running the schools the next year. Through conversation with the superintendent ascertain exactly when this is, as the period just previous to this decision is practically the only time when this plan can be put through.

Getting ready early

Involves planning social center work for a whole season

The amount to be asked for and the form of the request* will depend upon the kinds and extent of the activities to be undertaken. In determining these the advice of the superintendent will be most helpful. It may be found that he already cherishes plans for social center activities and in that case you can save yourself much labor as well as accomplish results with the minimum of friction by getting in behind his plans and letting him take the lead. He will then probably welcome outside suggestions from local leaders and a program of activities can be worked out which will at once receive the community's support. The amount of work which will be practicable will always be less than your ideal but your aim should include somewhat more than is demonstrably feasible.

While no scheme can be outlined here which will fit the needs of all localities the three essential points to think about in developing any program may be briefly set down. These

* If the state law makes it illegal for the board to expend money upon any social center activities consult pp. 10 to 13 of our pamphlet (No. R125), "How to Start Social Centers," for the remedy.

embrace provision for (1) the expenses of opening the buildings evenings; (2) salaries of workers, and (3) equipment and supplies. In computing the expenses under these heads the following considerations may be found suggestive:

(1) The extra expense for coal, electricity or gas and for the overtime service of janitor and engineer incidental to opening school-houses during the winter at night is an item which can be easily computed. The cost is generally greater when the whole building is used than when the assembly room alone is opened and it also varies with different schools. As a rule, however, the board of education can set a figure that will be uniform for all schools, varying only as the whole or a part (usually the auditorium) is used. With that information in hand it will be necessary only to decide which schools shall be opened and how many times each during the season in order to determine how much shall be asked for this purpose. The fundamental question of how much work shall be done is here involved. The answer will be determined by considerations as to what localities need centers most, what buildings have the most favorable accommodations and what is the largest appropriation that, considering public finances and the political situation, may hopefully be sought. If at all possible it will be well to include provision for meetings of the ward improvement and other associations which have community welfare at heart as well as for those of parent-teacher societies. In the New York Board of Education's budget for 1914 there is an appropriation of over \$5,000 for janitors' services in connection with social center activities undertaken by neighborhood associations, which the voluntary associations helped to get approved, besides the item for after-school playgrounds shown in the excerpt from the New York budget on page 7.

Details,
but very
important

(2) In computing the number of workers count at least one for each room or area which it is planned to use. Singing and dancing classes need two each, that is, one person beside the musician. Skillful club organizers can sometimes run several clubs at the same time, but all groups devoted to dramatics, embroidery, or any other cultural activity require constant direction. Capable social center directors receive \$4 and \$5 an evening, assistants from \$1.50 to \$2.50, and ordinary helpers \$1.00. With a skilled director in charge volunteer assistance can sometimes be used to piece out a staff—for a time—and such a person can often suggest economies in equipment as well as make the facilities at hand yield the maximum of service.

Outside help
in getting
budget items
approved is
increasing

(3) Equipment and supplies include such articles as extra chairs, small tables, magazines, phonographs, lanterns, curtains, basket-balls, volley-ball nets, games, etc. The kinds and quantity will depend entirely upon the character and extent of the work to be undertaken. After conversation with a Y. M. C. A. man or a playground director it will generally be possible to fix upon a round sum which will do for a beginning.

Investments
in ability pay
in social
work just as
in business

Working
from the
inside out
is generally
easier than
butting-in

II. Getting the Item Into the Tentative Budget

If the school superintendent has been "in" on all the planning and figuring incidental to determining the amount of the social center appropriation it has been decided to ask for, there will usually be no special difficulty in persuading the board to include your item among their estimates for the coming year. Ordinarily the superintendent will attend to that himself as a matter of course. In any event, practically the only reason which a school committee can allege for refusing to submit the social center item to the higher authorities is that the committee or group promoting it is not backed by sufficient public sentiment to justify them in giving the plan even the tacit support implied in the inclusion of it among their regular requests. That objection you can meet by getting the woman's club, ministers' association or chamber of commerce to endorse the social center idea by resolution, at the same time seeing to it that the action is adequately reported to the general public by the newspapers.

III. Getting the Social Center Item Finally Allowed

Ours is a
government
by public
sentiment

The problem is to convince the members of the common council, or whatever body makes up the annual city budget, that the community as a whole, or at any rate a very substantial portion of it, favors the appropriation of public funds for social center purposes. Often this can be accomplished through one or more public hearings,* at which arguments in favor of the item are presented by effective speakers, representing important organizations. Sometimes, however, the task requires more extensive efforts. Direct communications from taxpayers are the most effective means of moving city officials and their effect is almost directly proportional to the number of the messages sent.

* When the Detroit Common Council recently cut the \$17,668 social center appropriation out of the school budget the club women came immediately to the rescue. They appealed to the aldermen by telephone, through personal interviews, and with telling arguments at public hearings, with the result that the item was finally restored though the amount was reduced to \$5,000, the sum allowed the previous year.

Departmental Estimates.		
	Mandatory Fixed Charges.	Non-Mandatory.
1. Cost for 1914 ^{vacation} —		
4. Cost for 1914 of rates for teachers in Evening Recreation Centres:		
(a) As now organized—33 in Manhattan, 5 in The Bronx, 14 in Brooklyn, 2 in Queens and 2 in Richmond.....	111,986 25
(b) For nine (9) new centres—3 in Manhattan, 2 in The Bronx, 2 in Brooklyn, 1 in Queens and 1 in Richmond.....	20,932 50
5. Cost for 1914 of rates for teachers in Summer Evening Recreation Centres:		
(a) For 10 new centres, schools to be opened 2 nights each week during June, July and August—5 in Manhattan, 1 in The Bronx and 4 in Brooklyn.....	1,690 00
6. Cost for 1914 of rates for teachers in Baths:		
(a) As now organized—20 in Manhattan, 6 in Brooklyn and 1 in Queens.....	14,734 00
(b) For twenty-one (21) new baths to be opened in 1914—12 in Manhattan, and 9 in Brooklyn.....	7,812 00
7. Cost for 1914 of rates for teachers at after-school athletic playgrounds and competitions—		
(a) As now organized, 1,200 sessions at \$2.50 per session.....	3,000 00
(b) For extension of girls' athletic competitions, 200 sessions at \$2.50 per session.....	500 00
(c) For the opening of one hundred and sixty-three (163) after-school athletic playgrounds for an average of one hundred and thirty-three (133) sessions each— ^{see} 54 in Manhattan, 19 in The Bronx, 56 in Brooklyn, 2 in Queens and 2 in Richmond.....	54,197 50
	\$304,378 75	\$108,748 50

New York
City
Board of Education
Organizations

Fragment of the New York Board of Education Budget for 1914
Showing Where Voluntary Associations Helped



But public
sentiment
is naturally
lazy

By partitioning the city into districts and under a committee with a well-thought-out plan of action, a very general popular expression can be easily arranged. Through the school children, parent-teacher societies, ward improvement associations, church congregations, and other bodies interested in community welfare requests to write the city officials regarding the social center appropriation can be widely distributed among the taxpayers. Postal cards, addressed and bearing alternative expressions of approval and disapproval, ready for the parents' mark and signature, and carried home by interested school children, will generally result in an influential shower upon the city hall.

You arouse
people's
hearts
through
their brains

The easier it is made for people to register their wishes the larger will be the number who do so. If postals cannot be afforded, post cards (postage to be affixed by sender), or even handbills stating the arguments and giving explicit directions as to the wording of the message, the person to be addressed, and the ultimate date for mailing, can be used to good advantage. If the campaign is carried on simultaneously in all parts of the city and involves the holding everywhere of neighborhood meetings just previous to the time set for sending in the messages, most effective newspaper publicity will be gained and a very favorable psychological situation be created. There are few communities where, if the people have been made to understand what a social center is, the result of such a referendum will be negative.

When the school officials have been allotted definite sums of money for social center activities they will no longer doubt the community's will in the matter. Those who would promote social center extension can do no more effective work than that of helping the school people get that money.

Department of Recreation
Russell Sage Foundation
130 East 22nd Street, New York City



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